

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 899

PS 011 723

AUTHOR Wheeler, Samuel B.; Wilson, Cynthia E.
TITLE The Brookline After-School Special: A Program for Older Elementary Children in Brookline, Massachusetts. The Parent's Perspective and the Director's Perspective.
PUB DATE Jun 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at School's Out! A Conference on Day Care for the School-Age Child (Boston, MA, June 15-16, 1979). For other papers from this conference, see PS 011 714-726.
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *After School Day Care; Elementary School Students; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; *Program Implementation
IDENTIFIERS *Massachusetts (Brookline)

ABSTRACT

This brief paper describes the "Brookline After School Special:" a program created to meet the after-school needs of older elementary school-age children throughout the city of Brookline, Massachusetts. The rationale for the program, a discussion of aspects considered in implementing the program, and reflections on the first year of operation and present concerns are provided. In addition, the program director briefly comments on program design and staff activities and responsibilities. A number of issues that emerged from a self-evaluation of the program are indicated and discussed to highlight underlying questions and everyday concerns that arise in providing after-school day care for an older age group of children. (Author/RH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

The Brookline After-School Special: A Program for
Older Elementary Children in Brookline, Massachusetts

The Parent's Perspective

Samuel B. Wheeler

Chairman of the Board, Brookline After-School
Special Program, Brookline, Massachusetts

The "Brookline After School Special" was created in 1978 to meet the after-school needs of older elementary school-age children throughout Brookline, Massachusetts. Unlike the existing school-age programs, serving local needs in local elementary schools, this one was designed to attract older children from throughout the town.

Why Did We Do It?

In several ways, the Brookline After School Special Program (BASS) was the outcome of both the successes and the failures of after-school programs in the town. The success of extended day programs, which by 1978 had been established in every elementary school in town, had created a sizeable constituency of satisfied customers who both filled the programs and acted as advertisements, thereby creating still more demand. At Devotion School, the waiting list was nearly as large as the program enrollment. The size and longevity of some of the established programs also meant that there were many children who were veterans of three or four years in the same after-school setting, engaging in activities which had to appeal to kids from five to nine years old. They were showing signs of growing stale. There were also parents who found themselves with ten-year-old "graduates" who had had good after-school activities and who now had no regular, comparable place to go after school.

A number of efforts to provide suitable after school activities for older kids had been made prior to 1978. The town-wide extended day advisory committee, chaired by Mickey Seltzer of Brookline Human Relations Youth Resources, had held a number of meetings on the needs of older children and a grant proposal had been developed to try to address the needs of these children. Devotion School experimented with a program called "Bebop," consisting of a check-in center with optional activities which attempted to at least monitor the whereabouts of children after school. Several schools developed "Activities Programs," short courses or sequences of activities thought to be of interest to children from third grade up. None of them succeeded in combining the security and continuity of supervision desired by working or studying parents with the level of interest desired by the children.

BASS was established because the pressures of need coincided with the availability of space. The Devotion program had been seeking alternative sites outside the school for some time when Seltzer brought news of possible space in the Sewall school building. The necessary energy and opportunity were in place. I, as a parent from Devotion School, decided to work on a new program for older children at the new site. The program would cater to children throughout the town and would serve to relieve some pressure on space at my school.

How Did We Do It?

The first step was to convene a steering committee of representatives from each program and the Brookline Human Relations-Youth Resources. With a few changes in personnel, this committee became the founding body. It met in April of 1978 and began to brainstorm with Harry Lent, adult education coordinator for the Brookline public schools, about the possibilities of implementing the program.

It would be tedious to relate in sequence all the dozens of meetings and the unexpected turns of events that preceded the opening of the program. What I believe worth highlighting are the concerns that were uppermost in our minds as we planned, and the elements that provided the solutions. Our primary worries concerned arrangements for space, limits on enrollment, qualifications of staff, transportation, and apportionment of money. Organization and management were less pressing concerns.

Space. Could we really have space in Sewall School? How much? Was it suitable? What about competition for the space? Fortunately, the school department and school committee had been great friends of extended day care in Brookline. They were willing to donate space and custodian service, without which the program would scarcely be possible. In this case they also provided part of the problem, since the space that was to be allocated to us on June 19 was suddenly withdrawn. The matter was not settled until mid-August. We determined that the proposed space, though old and of uncertain amount, would be adequate, especially since we envisioned a program in which children would use the building as a home base and would travel from it on frequent trips.

Enrollment. Would we have too great a demand or too little? what ages should be involved? Should there be an upper limit? What would be the impact of a preponderance of the children from one school? Which children would we choose to enroll if we had more applicants than we could accommodate?

To answer some of these questions, we distributed a questionnaire to as much of the school population from grades 2-7 as we could reach, describing the proposed program and asking for expressions of general interest and of the kinds of activities desired. On the basis of the answers, we estimated that we might have as many as 70 children enrolled, mostly from two or three schools and concentrated in grades 3-5. There was only minor interest from the sixth grade. Although, on the basis of these data, it did not appear that we would be swamped, we did derive a formula for equal distribution of enrollment slots among schools. The enrollment we had on opening day corresponded closely, in size and complexion, to our estimates. (We have found that the users of day care in

this program are typical of users in other programs within Brookline. Most are from Devotion and Pierce, the schools with the highest percentage of single parents, and most are children of households where the parent or parents work outside the home.)

Staff. Before advertising for staff, we spent some time making decisions about the type of staff we wanted. We wanted a varied staff with a diversity of talents and interests, a variety of racial backgrounds if possible, and a fairly even distribution of men and women. We wanted to be sure that they were, as a group, equipped to lead children in sports (a heavy favorite in the parent survey) and music, as well as games and crafts. We hoped to foster a noncompetitive atmosphere in which the individual worth of each child could find affirmation. We wanted the minimum of regimentation and coercion compatible with safety and good order.

We decided to advertise for and pick a director first, even though time was short, and to let him or her assist in choosing the rest of the staff. (As it happened, the director ended up making practically all the decisions on staffing with very little involvement from parents.) Advertising and a referral provided good candidates for director and we have been very pleased with our eventual choice. The staff for year one had four women and two men in addition to the director. All were white, but with a very nice blend of complementary interests.

Transportation. How could we move kids from seven or eight schools each day? Get them home? What would it cost? Should we buy a vehicle? In the end we did not buy our own vehicle or provide our own driver but found it more convenient to hire one or more of the following: a school bus, station wagons, and taxis. On certain days, the bus was retained for the entire afternoon for special trips, but with time our image of the mobile after-school program faded. The kids did not really want to travel that much.

Money. We were not worried about "front money." The Devotion program offered to provide a "cushion," and contributions from other programs paid for initial postage and printing. Our collective experience with existing programs gave us confidence about how to proceed.

We were chiefly worried about estimating transportation costs and, to a lesser extent, about setting the director's salary. We underestimated actual transportation costs by about \$3,500 in our first budget, and overestimated enrollment so that our first projections of rates were lower than the final rates by about 30%.

The salary of the director was the focus of a number of debates of the sort that divide many day-care boards. Do we aim at the lowest possible rates or do we aim at the best possible staff? Do we set high rates and offer scholarships or sliding rates, or do we keep rates low and make the program almost universally affordable? The steering committee discussed these questions at length until the issue was resolved in favor of those who felt that high pay brought the greater good. The same rate was charged for all children. Scholarships, amounting to about 5% of total budget, were offered to all who applied.

Organization and management. The structure of other programs provided a framework which was more or less taken for granted. It was

readily agreed that the parent board would assume responsibility for fiscal management: collection of fees, payables, bookkeeping, incorporation, and tax exempt status. We had ready-made contract forms, procedures, payment systems and scholarship procedures, as well as knowledge of what had to be done to achieve incorporation as a non-profit entity. Some time was saved (and perhaps some issues overlooked) by this method. We concentrated on getting started and postponed some formalities of organization such as by-laws, elected officers and a board. By January, however, we had all of these elements.

What Are Our Present Concerns?

In looking back at the first year, I would make these comments. We rejoice that we have a program, that we found a good staff and an excellent, conscientious director, and that by and large the kids like and are proud of our program. We do not wish to underrate our pride and satisfaction.

We have some regrets and anxieties. We are conscious of a lack of parent involvement at many levels: little contact with staff, little extra-curricular social exchange among parents (often excused by involvement of parent board members in more pressing matters). This has contributed to a lowering of staff morale and an atmosphere of "taking staff for granted" among parent-customers.

We regret rates which are higher than those of most other programs in town, the lack of subsidized slots for children of welfare recipients, the limit that needing transportation places on the system, and some deficiencies in space and site.

Most of the things we regret at present we feel can improve in the future. We may work for more and better space, more parent involvement, more fund raising, and so on.

It has occurred to us that it may not be possible for a day care program for older children to enjoy the degree of parent involvement and concern that is often found in day care programs for younger children. We worry less about our older children. They are better able to make their own opinions known, articulate their own needs and feelings. At some level we are conscious of this and perhaps feel less need to monitor the care they are given. We are used to entrusting them to others. For these reasons, a different strategy for building parent participation into the program may be called for.

It is my opinion that we have made a good beginning but there are still many interesting questions to be asked. Have we really discovered what "older children" will thrive on in an after-school program? How do we find the right balance between custody and freedom? Is the "After School Special" really special enough?

The Director's Perspective

Cynthia E. Wilson

Director, Brookline After-School Special
Program, Brookline, Massachusetts

The Brookline, Massachusetts, After-School Special Program provides a variety of activity oriented experiences in an after-school setting for third through sixth grade children attending Brookline public schools. An underlying philosophy maintains that knowledge is best retained in a relaxed atmosphere where a "learn by doing" approach is promoted. Consequently, the program includes scheduled as well as spontaneous activities in art, music, cooking, dancing, athletics, strategy games, ecology and nature, dramatics, and orienteering. Field trips to museums, book shops, and local manufacturers are scheduled weekly so that the children may learn about the area in which they live.

The program is designed to attend to the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical aspects of a child's growth and development. Enriching experiences which allow for trial and error experimentation and which promote creativity are planned. Growth in self-reliance, self-esteem, and feelings of competence is fostered. The ability to make choices and to share and cooperate with others is encouraged. Good physical exercise, including athletics as well as dance and movement, is a regular part of the program. The need for some children to relax and unwind from school, to read, to do homework, or to sit and talk with a friend is recognized and supported. The nature of the program, therefore, allows for activity and leisure, individual and group experiences, and indoor and outdoor activities, depending upon the choices of the children and the staff.

The structure of the daily schedule remains fairly consistent throughout the week. The children arrive at the center at approximately 2:30 p.m. and meet in assigned groups for snack. They hear important messages and choose activities for the afternoon. Children choose two from twelve possible activities, the first one running from 3:00-4:00 and the second from 4:00-5:00. Time to be with a friend, do homework, read, or simply relax is an option for each child. After 5:00 the children spend time with one another playing quiet games, reading, or participating in any other quiet activity they wish. All children leave the program for the day between 5:30 and 5:45 p.m. Several times during the year, they pursue ongoing activities such as making movies, cooking gourmet foods, making and binding books, and batiking. In addition, members of the local community are invited to share their experiences in such areas as puppet theater and science experiments.

The After-School Special is housed in the Sewall School. It operates on the second floor in two classrooms (each approximately 25' x 35') and a small library corner (approximately 10' x 12'). The indoor space is designed with flexibility in mind. Each of the two large rooms is divided in half, thereby affording four smaller areas. Each area is arranged differently, with large work tables, desks, and chairs. Rugs, pillows, and

curtains on the windows promote a relaxed, home-like atmosphere. A movable wall, built by two parents, serves as both a room divider and a favorite surface for drawing and painting. There is a small gymnasium on the first floor. The building does not contain kitchen facilities; however, a nearby school has offered the use of its home economics room. A playground behind the school and one across the street are utilized by the program and hikes to a nearby pond and bus trips to various parks are scheduled each week.

The staff of the After-School Special consists of six full-time counselors and one full-time program director. Their backgrounds are as varied as the activities they offer to the children. Each staff member has expertise in working with children and experience in other camp or recreational programs. Staff members meet weekly with the director to discuss weekly programming, home group time, issues in child development, and individual experiences of the previous week. There is daily supervision of the staff by the director in the form of informal discussions and suggestions. Formal staff supervision conferences are held several times during the year with each staff member. In addition, knowledge and experience are shared at meetings with staff members from other Brookline Extended Day programs.

The director is responsible for the overall management of the program. Specific daily duties include curriculum planning, enrollment and intake procedures, purchasing, and staff training and supervision. Ongoing duties include conferences with parents, school principals and teachers; arrangements for activities outside the center; and program evaluation and development. The director works closely with the staff, acting as a facilitator and resource person as well as liaison between the staff and the Board of Directors of the program. As time permits, the director participates in and leads daily activities.

As we near the close of the first year of the Brookline After-School Special, we find ourselves evaluating our experience. A number of issues, most of which were anticipated prior to the start of the program, have proved to be important. They are included here to highlight some of the underlying questions and everyday concerns involved in after-school day care for an older age group of children.

Setting priorities for an after-school program was a major concern of the director from the beginning, as she was hired only two weeks before the program was to start. Her first major assumption was that the most important ingredient in a successful program would be a talented staff. Once the staff was hired, the director would have their support in molding the daily program. Within a week six staff members were hired, each with a specific expertise and all together able to provide a balanced program. The last week was spent planning the space, determining the format of the daily schedule, determining equipment and supply needs, discussing activity ideas and the philosophies of after-school day care, and thereby getting to know one another in a sharing, productive way.

One of the first questions brought up for discussion in the planning week was, "What are we doing here?" Each staff member shared his or

her reasons for taking the job and we found that a common motivation was the desire to help plan a new program for older children. More questions arose from this common ground -- questions like "What do we want to say to children?" and "How do we best say it?" We took these questions very seriously, for we knew that we were creating not only different activities for children but also an atmosphere in which to do the activities. In order to approach these ideas, focus questions were raised. We needed to determine our feelings about discipline, safety, competition, structure versus openness, and variety and choice. Aware of the "testing" which would occur and the comparisons children would make between our program and their prior day care experiences, we wanted an approach consistent among all staff members.

We talked about using the term "after-school" as opposed to "day-care" and about the growth in independence and self awareness among children of this age group. We talked about working mothers, single parent families and the feelings that some children might have of being shuffled from one place to another during the day. Most likely we would be the final stop on the schedule. Many children might be tired, frustrated, and even angry at what had occurred earlier at home or at school. Others might display a burst of energy and require an outlet for that. And still others might desire a quiet, yet structured, activity. (From day to day, from child to child, this proved to be the case.) In any case, after putting ourselves in the children's shoes, we felt it was clear that each child would not want or need the same kind of afternoon.

Variety and choice became a key to the program. In addition to satisfying different needs, we wished to encourage children to learn to make choices, to try new things, and to be more responsible for themselves. More decisions were made, ranging from the use of fresh cheese, fruits, and vegetables for snacks to the use of recycled materials and old furniture as opposed to new, more efficient equipment. We decided to let the children's choices of activities determine their division into groups. In other words, the children were not to be divided according to age, sex, or ability, but instead were to be allowed to group according to their interests. This plan worked and we were delighted to find a mix of ages, sexes, and talents in most activities during the year.

Because a maximum effort was made in this initial stage, the start of the program went smoothly. As is usually the case, some children were confused and uneasy about coming to a new place. Parents were also concerned, but because the staff had participated in the planning, they collectively felt secure and this was successfully conveyed to parents and children.

Another important concern was the fact that precedents would be set in the first year. In other words, policies and attitudes set within the first year would be difficult to change and therefore should be well thought out in advance. So a "keep it simple" approach was maintained, one in which an emphasis was placed on observing children's interests, listening, and not "biting off more than one could chew." One result of this was that formal volunteer and student teaching programs were deferred until the second year, when there would be time to develop a good

program with adequate supervision. Also the purchase of major equipment, other than certain necessary items, was delayed in order to determine the best allocation of funds according to the interests of children and staff.

A third factor involved the needs of parents, and the impact of the program on participating families. In a general sense, a policy of individual, personalized attention was maintained, with allowance for flexibility in children's scheduling. Because finances were of great concern to parents, care was taken to avoid additional "field trip" charges -- parents were never asked to contribute money for a trip. All expenses for trips, which were a major part of the program, came out of the weekly budget.

As we tried to keep parents' interests in mind, we were troubled by a lack of parent participation and feedback. In essence, we had neither. Intellectually, we could understand why. Parents were busy and tired and most sent their children home via our transportation at the end of the day. In addition, the children were older and more responsible. The children were ready to accept more independence and many parents were ready to give it. Unfortunately, however, some parents had never even seen the program. We wondered what this lack of involvement was saying to the children. Could children be proud of and want to attend a program in which their parents had no involvement? The lack of parent/staff interchange began to affect staff morale. Our job was a difficult one that required us to juggle the varied interests and moods of the children, many of whom were tired after a long day. It was obvious that the staff needed encouragement from the parents as well as contact with parents that could help them better understand the children. This became a familiar topic for discussion at the weekly staff meeting. Parent/child/staff get-togethers were planned, a monthly newsletter was established, and some parent conferences took place, but there remained an obvious lack of reinforcement from the parents. The problem is yet unresolved and may very well be one inherent in our operation. Although a "parent-run" organization, the program is really self-contained and self-sustaining and it may be that staff support will have to come solely from within.

A final area of relevance is that of community relations. It was important that the community become aware of the After-School Special, from a service as well as a public relations point of view. Therefore, articles were written periodically in local newspapers, flyers were distributed to all third through sixth grade children in December and June, and local agencies were notified of our existence. The director met with other Extended Day Program directors and joined various committees dealing with child related matters within the area.

Next year will mark the beginning of a new phase in the After-School Special Program. Now that a strong foundation has been set, the director and staff can start to build. Attention will be turned towards designing the space, incorporating more variety in program planning, and increasing parent communication. The staff now has a better understanding of the needs and concerns of our children. We know how to proceed.